

Point-Counterpoint

Should physicians accept gifts from their patients? see also p 138

William Andereck
2100 Webster St, Suite
418
San Francisco, CA
94115

andereck@ix.netcom.com

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Yes: If they are given out of beneficence or appreciation

The practice of patients giving gifts to their physicians is as longstanding as medicine itself. But the giving of gifts to those in positions of authority has recently come under scrutiny. Bill and Hilary Clinton, for example, have come under attack for accepting gifts from admirers during the last year of their White House stay. Medicine involves a fiduciary relationship, with patients relying on physicians' advice and expertise. If they present physicians unsolicited gifts, is it ethical to accept them? I believe it is, with a few important caveats.

First, let me distinguish clearly between gifts from individual patients and those offered by drug companies, device manufacturers, and other commercial ventures. There is a wealth of evidence that such corporate gifts can influence the behavior of health care providers, often in ways that run counter to good patient care.¹

A patient's intent in giving a physician a gift is relevant. There may be 3 possible motives for gift giving: influence, pure beneficence, and appreciation. No one can ever know with certainty the motive behind any action, but subsequent behavior after the gift has been given may provide a clue.

Giving a gift to influence an outcome is a bribe, and as such, it is unethical. The increasing tendency of hospitals to attract donor money with promises such as "access to the best" is disturbing. The implication here is that a sizable donation will result in special attention or the ability to "jump the queue." Some institutions even distribute

"donor cards" to give patients tangible evidence of their special status. Individual physicians have also been involved in this practice, which cheapens the physician and destroys the trust inherent in a healthy doctor-patient relationship.

But some people are simply generous by nature. Gifts to the mail carrier, the newspaper carrier, the hairdresser, the physician, and others in their lives are just a part of their personality. They derive pleasure from the act of giving itself. Such behavior is inspirational and should not be thwarted.

What about giving gifts in appreciation of a previous action or in celebration of a healthy relationship? Although this motive is more focused than pure beneficence, it does not aim to change future behavior. To understand the appropriateness of gift giving in this situation, we need to consider the nature of the doctor-patient relationship.

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Some people hold that the degree of involvement between a physician and patient should be a purely neutral and objective one. Such pure objectivity would preclude acts of sentiment—such as giving a gift out of appreciation—as irrelevant and damaging to the neutrality of the association. But an alternative school of thought imbues the doctor-patient relationship with attributes such as compassion and trust. These qualities stretch the relationship beyond a strictly neutral and impersonal one. Pellegrino and Thomasma have described the bond between a physician and individual patient using the concept of a special type of friendship.^{2(pp51-60)} This involves recognizing personal values and the provision of information and access to treatment. Friends recognize the special nature of their relationship, and in this context, presenting gifts is both natural and honorable.

Provided that patients are not trying to influence their relationship with their physician, the doctors should accept the gift with a smile, send a thank-you note, and move on.



Gordon Southgate

Gifts from patients with no strings attached are acceptable

References

- 1 Lexchin J. Interactions between physicians and the pharmaceutical industry: what does the literature say? *CMA J* 1993;149:1401-1407.
- 2 Pellegrino ED, Thomasma DC. *For the Patient's Good: The Restoration of Beneficence in Healthcare*. New York: Oxford University Press; 1988.